

## 2 Tallman and Tallman

Steve sat perched at the limit of the couch cushion. Ben faced him in a straight back chair brought from the connecting dining room. The two stared at one another. Ben's lips drew down in a deep frown, his eyes haughty and firm. Steve knew his own face mirrored his uncle's. They might disagree, they might fight, but they weren't really all that different. Okay, maybe they were, at the crust. Ben was a dime store wooden Indian. He wore the cowboy hat and the snakeskin boots, and he pulled his long, age-whitened hair into a ponytail secured by a gaudy silver and turquoise clasp. Ben didn't know turquoise from gravel, but his lobbyist clients expected it from Native Americans, and he delivered. Steve, beyond the face, looked nothing like his uncle. He hated even to think how he looked. His gray suit was rumpled, the white shirt tired, the blue tie askew. And his face, if it looked as exhausted as he felt, must have given the gaunt appearance of death.

The coffee table between the men supported two highballs, a pitcher of tap water, and a bottle of cheap scotch. It was all Steve could serve after seventy-three straight hours at work. His pantry lay empty and his refrigerator smelled faintly of rot even from the living room. Busted, and for how many days? It would have to wait. His eyes burned, ants crawling behind them. His face felt slack, like overworked Playdough. He wanted – he needed – to sleep.

Ben mixed a drink heavy with the liquor. Steve's glass held only water.

"I got me quite a problem," Ben said after his first long sip. "I've got a mess you would not believe. If things go bad, a lot of people get hurt. Just the thing for my journalist nephew."

"Talking to the press now, are you? I thought you only spoke to paying customers and their marks."

Ben sent him a wry smirk. "And so I'm doing now. You'll see

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why when you hear me out.”

Steve’s face was incapable of subtle throwaway emotion. “Last time I heard you out was five years ago. There was shouting and finger pointing and I hope that isn’t where you’re going now because I don’t have the stuff for it, really I don’t.”

“That was personal, young man. Family stuff. This is business.”

“Okay, fine. Business.” Steve shifted his weight on the couch, but did not relax a muscle. “Look, two things come to mind, Ben. One: you should really give up the country cowboy routine. You’ve a degree from Loyola Law, for Christ’s sake.”

Ben threw up his arms in mock protest. “This little injun? You speak with fork-ed tongue, boy!”

“Two: your lobbying business never had much to do with me. Why has that changed all of a sudden?”

“Now, on that point, you’re wrong.” Ben leaned forward in his chair, his lanky frame bringing him within inches of his nephew’s eyes. Ben was an old man. His face was the brown, wrinkled leather of one too long in the sun, a face with ancient, intense concerns etched into its skin. But no sadness lived there. No weakness was coded into the spider web lines of mischief cut around those eyes, or in the deep grooves around his mouth that spoke of both confidence and laughter. This man wore his age with authority.

“I know I don’t come around so much,” he said, “and when I do, it’s usually to bemoan your unfortunate choices in life. But, this thing here is bigger than that. It’s bigger than me. Bigger than you, but you’re all wrapped up in its center.” He jabbed at Steve with his whiskey glass. “You can’t weasel out of this one, boy. It’s your Bear staring you in the face.”

Steve let out a long, put upon breath and shook his head. “I know you too well,” he said. “You’re given to melodrama, Ben. Occupational hazard, I suppose. And I wish you’d stop it with that ‘boy’ business. I’m forty-three years old.”

“Well, okay, that’s fair. Let’s excuse it as a habit grown from seventy-one years of perspective.”

They sat listening to the harsh moan of the January wind. The windows rattled. After a moment, Ben spoke, no longer affecting the Arizona corn pone character for which he was known in Washington. “My name is Ben Blackcloud Tallman. I’m your father’s brother. Your father, Marcus Knighthorse Tallman, was a schmuck. He

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abandoned his life long before he died of overwork and an aimless heart. I loved your father. The things I say, I say out of love. But, when he turned from his ancestors out of love for a woman, he didn't do his sons any favors. Your granddaddy knows that. He knew it years before your father admitted it to himself. That's why he visited Marcus more than any of his other eight children. He didn't come to see your father so much as he came to see you, to make sure you grew up knowing who you are."

Steve knew where this went. This was a well-worn stretch of road for them.

Still, Steve's eyes glazed at the thought of his grandfather. As a boy, he had always looked forward to the old man's infrequent visits. The Tallman siblings would crowd the streetward windows of the house, watching for the approach of that nominal head of their family. Granddaddy had never arrived alongside Dad in the family car, and never by taxi. He always made the journey from New Mexico by bus, then walked the five miles from the Greyhound station in Indianapolis to the Tallman household. With him came an entourage of friends, advisors, and assorted straphangers, never less than five or six at a time, and all in full Apache regalia, as if on a mission to some foreign land. Though the vestments of his office were no more than a few feathers, beads and bones over blue jeans and flannel shirt, the elder Tallman carried himself like an ambassador from a great nation, which, indeed, he was. Granddaddy was an elder on the reservation out west, the reservation Steve's father had left, and that Steve had never seen.

He was also the great spiritual mentor of Steve's life. Whereas Dad had always been absorbed in the constant concerns of making a living, almost to the exclusion of involvement with his kids, Granddaddy had attended to the hungry souls of his grandchildren. He spent a great deal more time with Steve than with the others, whether because Steve was more receptive to his teachings or more in need of them, he never said. The two of them spent many hours together walking the neighborhood, or sitting out on the front stoop, Granddaddy imparting his old world brand of Apache philosophy, Steve soaking it up like the young sponge he was. Many times in adult life, Steve found himself surprised at how those talks had shaped his view of the world, directed his thoughts and molded his decisions. He was his grandfather's son, more than he had ever been

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his father's.

The old man no longer traveled. He was well enough, but at 106 years old, he preferred to stay close to his ancestors, just in case. Steve had not seen Granddaddy in over fifteen years; the two had chosen opposed worlds in which to live. Steve often wondered about his destiny, if there was one. If there was a heaven for Indians and a heaven for The Other People, as Granddaddy called them, then what place awaited those who were both, and neither?

"Granddaddy never had a clue," Steve heard himself saying. Regret tinged his voice. "He wanted me to be Apache, but I'm not Apache."

Ben chuckled, a humorless, but not unkind sound. "You're Apache, all right. Your dad didn't teach it to you, and your white Catholic mamma didn't neither, but you got it in you, boy. I read people, you know. Remember, I'm a lobbyist."

Steve chose to ignore the fact that Ben got his mother's race wrong. The old man was baiting him.

Ben paused, and the frown returned to his face. "Remember all that stuff the old man told you? All that stuff about fear and faith, redemption, transfiguration from man to *human*, reincarnation and such? I believe it, because I see it in you. You aren't just a grown up little boy influenced by his grandfather. Your grandfather's spirit is too big for one man to hold. He shares it with you. It's part of you, flown all this way over whatever spirit conduit there is, to finish the task your grandfather took on, and that your father never started."

"Sure, Ben. Make me a good little Indian, huh?"

"Exactly. With a little help from yours truly."

Steve wanted to sleep. Ben kept him up for no apparent reason. The refrigerator needed repair. "It's late, Ben."

"It's only eight o'clock."

"We've been over all this before. Sorry, but I wasn't interested then, and I'm not interested now."

Ben took a gulp of his drink, sat it on the table, and rose like a piston from his seat. He crossed to the easy chair that held his coat, groped something out of the inside pocket, and stepped back across to Steve. He slapped a crumpled white envelope onto the table.

"Sleep on that."

"What is it? A genealogy report?"

Ben tapped the envelope. "This is the end of the world, as we

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know it. Your life will cease to be as it is. This nation, even this world, will cease to be as it is. Things will be better, or things will be destroyed, or both. That could all happen, or nothing at all. But, first, you'll have to read it."

Steve stared without interest at the envelope. His uncle's speech did not impress him. Melodrama was Ben's stock in trade. For all Steve knew, the envelope contained nothing more important than a bus schedule.

"You're a smart boy," Ben said after a sip of his drink. "You'll know what it means."

"Why don't you just save some trouble, and *tell* me what it means?"

"Some stories have to be lived, not told. You can never tell a man the meaning of a thing. That's a job for the spirit."

"Uh-huh."

Ben took a corner of the envelope between thumb and forefinger, and jiggled it. A thin square of lucite clattered out onto the table. Steve recognized it as a computer semi-hard prism, the chemical-electric kind, A bunch of living proteins electrically charged so that they carried information. Cheap stuff, for those who couldn't afford Net fees, and so carried their data in their pockets.

"So?"

Ben tapped an impatient tattoo on the plastic square.

Three letters lanced across the prism face in careless script from a fine-line felt marker: EOG.

"EOG. Equal Opportunity in Government Act?"

Ben nodded.

"So what? Look, I know you and your folks at the Native American Movement are upset about that bill, but we've discussed it before. It'll never make it to law. If it did, the Supreme Court would throw it out the second it cleared the president's pen. The thing is unconstitutional."

Ben finished his drink, then placed the glass on the table between them. "For once, I'm not interested in arguing politics, boy. I just want you to read the file."

"What's it say?"

"You've got your granddaddy's head. Figure it out."

"Where's it from?"

"Not important. Let's say we borrowed it from a reporter fella.

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Print man. You never heard of him.”

“Borrowed?”

“Don’t worry, he still has his original. We lifted a shadow of it off his desk station. The man never noticed. By the way, the security’s been disabled, so you won’t have to work at breaking it.”

“You expect me to violate the stolen notes of a fellow journalist?”

“Why not? He stole the information *in* the notes. Besides, as the newspaper man, he has the greater claim to high journalistic ethics. You’re just television.”

“Thanks. I like you, too.”

Ben stretched to work out the kinks. “I’d better head home. An old fogey like me shouldn’t ought to be out so late.”

“It’s only just after eight. You said as much.”

“I did, didn’t I? Well, maybe I just want to leave you alone with your little present. Give you time to think, and listen to your ancestors.”

“What makes you think I won’t toss it in the trash the minute you walk out the door?”

“I already told you. This is your Bear. You have to face up to it. We aren’t talking free choice here.”

Steve ignored the heavy spiritual references creeping into the conversation. They were there intentionally, to draw him into debate, and into the wrong end of another high-handed moral harangue. Steve hoped, for once, to avoid the all too familiar trap.

Braced as he was against his uncle’s intentions, Steve felt surprise when Ben reached for his coat and started to put it on.

“You’re really leaving?”

A mischievous smile. “Don’t you want me to? You have work to do. I’ll just be in the way.”

Steve rose to his feet. He had expected a long visit, the usual intimate badgering about his supposed religious and cultural antecedents. Such was the centerpiece of his dealings with Ben, his dearest relative. It was expected, dreaded, and now suddenly, strangely, missed.

“I’m glad you came by,” he said. He lied, but something seemed called for, and nothing else came to mind.

“I’ll be in town a few days,” Ben said. “The Westin has a fair spread at lunch, and I got no appointments ’til Thursday. Besides, I

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got an expense account.” He flashed another of his electric bad boy smiles. All gravity vanished. He was the down-home, tobacco-chawin’, smoke-blowin’ lobbyist again.

They walked out onto the front porch, a six-by-eight concrete slab with an overhead supported by a single wooden post in the corner. The yard beyond it extended two hundred feet to the road and was bordered on all sides by tall evergreen hedges ideal for privacy. Ben’s rental car sat in the driveway, the dull light of the moon reflecting from the solar cells lining its top. A north wind scurried along the brown grass, chilling Steve to the core. He still wore his shirtsleeves and tie, an untenable combination for the hour and season.

“I’m too old for this,” Ben said. “Got to get back west as soon as possible. Did you know they’re calling for snow in these parts?”

“This is Indiana. It happens.”

“Maybe, but these Indiana drivers don’t know beans about handling the stuff. Hell, I live in a desert, and *I* can drive in snow.” He turned to Steve, seeming not to notice his nephew’s occasional shivers. “Where’s Patty? She’ll be home before the stuff comes down?”

Steve’s jaw tightened. He preferred not to answer, but Ben’s unwavering stare required it.

“She isn’t here. She went to visit her mother.”

“Visit her mother?” Ben fell silent for all of two seconds. “You didn’t go and run her off, did you?”

“Come off it, Ben. She went to visit her mother. She was lonely around here. I haven’t been home much.”

“That girl is your link to the world, young man. She’s the only thing that keeps you from becoming a worthless workaholic shit. You get her back.”

“It’s a free country. She’s a grownup.” He withered under Ben’s reproachful eyes. “A mature seventeen, then. She’ll be back.”

“You get her back. You go to her. You apologize. You promise her anything, and deliver. You get that girl back.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Well, somebody’s gotta do his job, God damn it.”

They fell silent again. Steve listened to the ghostly non-engine sound of traffic on the street. He recalled from his childhood the tenor rumblings of internal combustion engines, rare even then.

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Electric vehicles made no noise at all.

“Well, I’ll never get home at this rate,” Ben said. He slapped Steve on the shoulder and stepped down from the porch. “Take care, young nephew. Get some sleep.”

“I intend to.”

The old man loped toward the driveway and the waiting rental car. A flash of white light, and Ben was seated, door closed, engine running. It was so like him, so directed once he made up his mind. As the car rolled backwards, the driver side window came down.

“A *lot* of sleep,” the shadowed head said. “You’ll need it, and *read that file!*”



Sleep came in shallow snatches. Steve was alone. Ben was gone. Granddaddy was gone. Most important of all, Patricia was gone. But something came to him, or he to it. They converged from a great distance. He approached it indirectly, a meandering, confused trek across dusty plains, with scrub and rock underfoot. He moved with the erratic, zigzagging motion of a rabbit avoiding predators, but the thing loomed always before him. The air felt unnaturally clean and crisp. The sky darkened to a thunderhead gray. Nothing much to see. But something was there. He approached it with caution at first, then more deliberately. He approached with resolve, and also with fear.

There. It formed from the gray void, huge, black, flat as a shadow against the sky, but infinite.

The Bear.

It moved against the deep overcast, an undulating, almost featureless black with bright red flashes for eyes, chips from a mirror that reflected the soul. Its claws were sword-length razors, a bright, wet red. Steve feared seeing the red, but it came to him nonetheless. It was *his* red. It was his from long ago, from centuries ago, and throughout intervening time. The claws were his tomorrow.



Steve snapped awake. A nightmare. No big deal. He squinted at the bedside clock. Only 10:30, not two hours since he fell into bed. He rolled over and burrowed deeper into his covers, but could not find the sleep he craved. Had his body forgotten how? Steve knew the effects of exhaustion. His experience was broad at falling asleep while standing, or tripping into that false phase of hyper-alertness



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that sometimes precedes collapse. This was the latter. His senses railed against forced commands to relax. They reached out into the room, the rest of the house, out to the yard and the distant street, looking for stimuli. They found only the soft hum of Alfred on the table across from the bed. No passing trucks, no leaking faucets, no creaking boards fed his senses interest. The house was a tomb.

“Lights, two,” he said into the dark. The lamp next to Alfred glowed, enough to reflect the features of the room.

There hung the standard of his battalion during the war, festooned with the ghosts of over 500 men, and the hopes and nightmares of the fifteen survivors. There hung the photo of himself and Walter Marks, CBS News division chief, on the day Steve put the new magazine show on the air. There hung the more personal photo, the group shot of him with his first satcam crew. Chelsea stood beside him. Though not a crew member *per se*, she was the first of his twelve vertolifter pilots, and one of his closest friends. They spoke the same language, Chelsea and he, scarred as they were by the same monstrous war. Finally, his eyes turned to the bedside table and its overflow of plastic pill bottles. Five different drugs for one lousy condition, yet another souvenir of war.

Alfred sprawled atop the table across the room. His monitor glowed from its grasp on the wall, its weird screen saver showing endlessly passing desert plains running below cerulean skies populated with frantically transmuted white clouds.

No wonder I’m having nightmares, Steve thought.

“Alfred.”

The ready screen appeared on the monitor. A cartoon dog with floppy ears and one spotted eye ogled Steve from across the room. Its tongue hung loose and dripping from its mouth.

“Hello, Steve,” the computer speakers said in a cheery buddy voice. “How are you tonight?”

“Can’t complain. How are the puppies?”

“Potty trained!”

Security satisfied, Steve relaxed attention to his voice. “Alfred. Call Belinda.”

“That number has been deleted from my directory,” the computer said in his bubbly game show host voice. “Should I recover it from Limbo and copy it to a permanent file?”

“No. Retrieve it this once, then delete.”

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“Dialing. Would you like to check your mail? There are seven messages on E-mail, and four on Voice.”

“No.”

“Maintaining mail. Would you like—”

“Alfred. Suppress standard housekeeping procedures.”

“Hello?”

The voice was new, but familiar. A window opened on the monitor’s desktop, showing the digital image from the videophone link. The window showed a dark-haired, middle-aged woman with sharp features that nonetheless hinted at faded youthful beauty.

“Belinda, it’s Steve.”

He saw her discomfiture in the quick tightening of the lines across her brow. “Steve. Why are you calling me? Why is your video off?”

“Sorry, I’m calling through the computer. I’d like to talk to Patricia.”

“Patricia isn’t available just now.”

“Is she home, Belinda? I really need to talk to her.”

“I’ll tell her you called. I’m sure she’ll get back with you—”

“For pity’s sake, Belinda, I didn’t call *you*. I just want to talk to my daughter. If I’m going to get hung up on, I’d rather it was by her.”

In answer, the video window went blank. Had she hung up on him? Steve threw back his covers. He swung his legs to the cold floor and pulled himself to a sitting position. By God, he’d talk to Patricia if he had to put that phone on continuous redial all goddamned night!

“Alfred! Call Belinda!”

“That number is presently in use. Do you want me to hang up and dial again?”

Steve paused, half risen from his bed. He sank back to the mattress, slumping.

Of course, he thought. She has me on hold.

“Dad?”

He looked at the screen. Patricia stared out at him, her face drawn close to the monitor. It was the same round face that had left him two weeks ago, no change at all, but marvelous. She had the same short, dark hair, the same tiny tattoo on her right cheek next to her nose (kids!), the same round, brown eyes. The high definition

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digital window emphasized the warm, golden glow of her skin. That look of a year-round tan was one of the perks of her mixed heritage. Boys loved it, much to Steve's chagrin.

"Hi, honey."

"Hi, Dad. Where's your video?"

"I'm calling through Alfred. You wouldn't want to see me, anyhow. Just got out of bed."

"Uh-huh." She looked into the screen though she found nothing there. "What's up, Dad?"

He shrugged. "I just wanted to talk to you, see how you were doing."

She sat back from the screen, relaxed, no cares at all. "I'm fine. What about you? What are you doing in bed at this hour?"

"Not sleeping, that's for sure."

"Working too hard again? You sound tired."

"I'm all right. I was just thinking of you. Miss you, really."

"Don't be so hang dog. I'm not gone forever." Her brow knitted and she glanced off screen. It pained him to see those lines on her face. They were so like her mother's. "It's no big deal, okay? It's just that the house was so empty."

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

She leaned forward again. Her eyes darted, searching the blank screen in front of her as if she might find some evidence of him there. "Hey, take care of yourself. Mom's in the other room. Every now and then, she gives me the evil eye. I have to go, Dad."

"I understand. I wish it didn't have to be this way."

"Things happen. I'll call you back when I'm alone. We'll really talk, okay?"

"Sure. Maybe I'll call you. Tomorrow."

"That wouldn't be such a great idea."

The conversation hung on silence. Belinda stood between them, invisible, but there.

"Well, as long as you're okay."

"I am, but you aren't. Get some sleep."

"I intend to."

"Bye, Daddy."

"Bye, honey."

The window closed.

"The call has been terminated," Alfred said with a sense of ac-

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complishment. “I am deleting the phone number now.”

Steve sat on the edge of his bed for many minutes. Why had he not said the necessary things? Why had he not said he loved her? How had he wrecked his life in so short a time? “College grads,” Chelsea had told him once, years ago. “Too much brains, not enough sense.” Chelsea was a smart one, and prickly.

Alfred’s screen saver returned. The endlessly advancing desert plain was just too much to stomach.

“Alfred. Blank screen.”

Instant compliance. Well, *some* things worked.

He noticed Ben’s data prism on the table in front of Alfred. Had he meant to read it, or had he thrown it there for want of another place short of the threatened trashcan?

He got up and crossed stiff-legged to the table. He picked up the prism, a tiny thing about the size of a Chicklet. An unimpressive herald for the end of the world. Well, why not? Maybe it could smother his melancholy mood.

He snapped the prism into Alfred’s reader, and padded back across the cold floor as the computer read the new data to its memory.

“Data from drive A received,” Alfred said. “Would you like a summarization?”

“Shoot.”

“Pardon?”

Steve grimaced as he dropped onto the bed. Talking to machines was sometimes a chore. “Yes, Alfred. I’d like a summarization.”

“Memorex semi-hard C/E computer prism, capacity open-ended, 203.6 MB used. One file: *EOG\_Back.tdoc*, with an associated database, both on Micrographix Office Organizer v 2.0, standard interface.”

Well, Steve thought, the software was nothing grand. Ben’s poor, violated print reporter was a real underachiever type.

“Alfred. Open the file *EOG\_Back.tdoc*. Maximize the window.”

The monitor screen brightened. The requested file filled its forty-six inch rectangle.

Steve groaned. He fell back onto his pillow, and pulled the covers up to his chin. A group organizer, and a big one. Ben was making this really, really hard.

Steve got comfortable under the covers. He lay on his side, all

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openings in the blankets tucked and plugged to keep in the warm air. “Alfred. Give me basic stats on the group organizer. Layout only.”

“Seventeen interconnected personnel trees on thirty-seven layers. 638 fields from a linked database, 6,837 cross-references.”

“Good God.”

The numbers daunted him. Like most people raised in the information age, Steve could set up his system and add or subtract components as needed. He could use most high-end office software, some sophisticated animation software, and even a few important number crunchers. But all those programs had similar protocols, their commands and lines of code smothered under the thick insulation of a user-friendly interface. These days, software had to be attractive and effortless, tailored for users like Steve, who hated and even feared the technical secrets embedded in the programs they used. For the computer industry, it was keep it easy to keep it sold.

He thought about quitting the file. Group organizers were bad enough, but this one was a monster. It showed little apparent organization in the spider web of connecting nodes filling the screen before him, and sixteen more layers just like it waited below the surface. He considered turning it over to the eager young wareheads at work, give *them* the headaches. Then an approach occurred to him, one that could circumvent the usual laborious search through individual nodes and their associated layers.

“Alfred. Call up my folder *Equal Opportunity in Government Act*. Compare my contacts with the nodes in *EOG\_Back.tdoc*. Any correlations?”

“Entries in *EOG\_Back.tdoc* have a 94.886% correlation to the names listed in your database and notes.”

Steve frowned. Strike one in his information hunt. His notes contained the names of almost everyone in Congress, over two dozen governors, lots of lobbyists and political gunslingers, and dozens of others with a stake in either passage or defeat of the controversial EOG legislation. What did Ben’s stolen prism have that his own did not?

“How many entries without correlation?”

“Thirty-two.”

Now, that was more like it. “Cycle the non-correlating node entries from *EOG\_Back.tdoc* onto the screen, full screen, two second cycle.”

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He watched the enlarged rectangles flash onto the screen. Each contained a name and brief title for someone in the organizational chart. Steve knew most of the names, mainly industrialists, journalists, chairmen of political interest groups, even a few Supreme Court justices. Not much more than his own files contained. That made it strike two. There had to be more. Ben had come a long way with this information, whether from Washington or from New Mexico. But, he had said something about other appointments, which meant other reasons for being in town. Could this be some sort of silly joke, a run the journalist in circles gag? No. EOG was a serious matter with Ben. He did not joke about it. There had to be something hidden in those names.

“Alfred. How many cross-references for these nodes?”

“One hundred twenty-one.”

“Cycle in the cross-references with the associated nodes.”

He sank lower into his pillow; this would take a while. The display showed the same kind of rectangles overlaid with text, but many more of them. Relationships between his thirty-two new names and others in the organizer took shape almost immediately, but the shape they took was sadly predictable. Strike three.

And three was enough for one night, Steve thought. The cycling rectangles of bland text did what long hours of work had not. They lulled him toward sleep. His mind drifted away from data puzzles and toward that place inhabited by the few things he trusted in life. Patricia was there, in all her guises from loud, impatient baby, to screeching preschooler, to the wise and beautiful girl she was today. Chelsea was there. Chelsea never changed in this place, always hard-eyed and severe, but beautiful and powerful in her flame-retardant flight suit, the flight helmet cradled in the curve of her hip. And Anna. If any truly powerful fetish lived within Steve’s soul, it was Anna. She was small, fragile, unassuming in appearance, made studious by the round wire-framed glasses that spent more time in her tiny polishing hands than they spent on the bridge of her nose. But Anna was a titanic spirit, one of the most profound souls he had ever met. She had done great things in her forty-four years on earth, and would do more before she left the world. Steve hoped the modern lives they lived would permit his sharing the warmth of her life.

He started awake. Something triggered alarms in the flagging at-

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tention center of his brain.

“Alfred. Freeze window.”

Nothing there. Who cares about a middle-range functionary in the John Birch Society? There was something else. Had he imagined it?

“Reverse cycle. Five second cycle.”

The previous node flashed onto the screen. Electronics magnate. Tie that to John Birch Society. Big deal. It's a free country, and there was nothing illegal about being ultra right. The cycle reversed one more node. Ku Klux Klan. Interesting, but this guy was well known to Steve. Further back.

He stiffened when Alfred flashed the next node. Here was a name that spelled serious news when grouped with the previous three. The man's reputation was certainly conservative, but extremist? Perhaps the correlation was incidental, based on little more than conjecture. Or maybe it was based on perfectly logical associations that only the file's author knew anything about. Best not to jump to conclusions.

Instead, he simply jumped. The next name to appear stung Steve with such force that he bolted upright in bed. No thought of coincidence or casual association occurred to him. These five names on the same correlation line could not be an accident, and these five men could not come together in polite company, even for a game of checkers. The reputations of the last two would self-destruct in the process. Ben was right. This was big. Somehow, though, Steve expected more. This discovery, great as it was, could not have wrenched him back from sleep. His embedded journalistic skepticism would have required his subconscious to catalog the information and remind him of it in the morning. Something bigger waited, something his sleep-deprived brain had seen in the peripherals of a dream, and could not ignore. He watched the screen.

Alfred flashed the next node.

Steve reached for the phone.